

Series FolkSongs of Faith

This Message Qualifications to Be with God

Scripture Psalm 15

Psalm 15 was written by David. In it he described the requirements for individuals who want to be accepted by the LORD. The Psalm begins with a question, “Who may dwell in the LORD’s sanctuary” and “live on His holy hill?” The following verses give the answer to that question, and then the Psalm ends with a promise.

Read Psalm 15

In this Psalm David is not explaining how to gain access to God in heaven someday in the future. David wrote this Psalm in order to give instructions to the people of Israel about their day by day relationship with God. The point that David wanted to get across was that there was a connection in this life between behavior and closeness to God. This is a lesson that believers need to be reminded about today.

The questions in verse 1 concern the *quality* of the person. Anyone who desires to be in the presence of the LORD must meet God’s standards of holiness. This Psalm sets forth some of the characteristics of holiness which make a person qualified to be in the presence of the LORD.

The two questions in verse 1 are really the same. This is because Hebrew poetry uses a lot of parallelism. The verbs “dwell” and “live” are synonyms. These terms usually indicate a long term closeness and fellowship. The place of fellowship is in the “sanctuary” on the “holy hill” of Yahweh, the LORD.

Because these words “sanctuary” and “holy hill” are important to our understanding of this Psalm, I want to take a minute to give some background information. The word “sanctuary” refers to the Tabernacle that Yahweh told Moses and the people of Israel to build for Him after their exodus from Egypt. This tabernacle was a special kind of tent which could be taken apart, transported, and then set up again as the Israelites moved around the wilderness area of Sinai for almost forty years.

This tabernacle was then taken into the promised land under the leadership of Joshua, where it continued to be used as the most important place of worship by the Hebrews for several centuries, up until the permanent temple of Solomon was constructed in Jerusalem.

During the years of wandering in the wilderness, the tabernacle was always set up in the midst of the twelve tribes of Israel, at the center of the camp where the people could have easiest and quickest access to it. God wanted to be at the very center of the lives of His people. During David's lifetime this tabernacle was located in the city of Gibeon, about 15 miles away from Jerusalem.

The "holy hill" was in Jerusalem. In Scripture this hill is also known as Mount Zion and Mount Moriah. Toward the end of his life, David received instructions from God that the hill in Jerusalem was to be the site for the permanent temple to be built by Solomon.

The words "sanctuary" and "holy hill" represented the presence of Yahweh among His chosen people. Yahweh always wanted to be as close to the people as possible, and He wanted the people to orient their lives around Him. Yahweh wanted to be recognized as a personal God. He wanted the Hebrew people to understand that He was near, watching over them with an intense, jealous, and infinite love, and concerned about their welfare, unlike the gods worshipped by the people groups which surrounded Israel. Those gods were always distant, remote, and mostly disinterested in human affairs.

David wanted to be as close to God as possible. David was concerned not only about his personal relationship with the LORD. He wanted all of his countrymen to be qualified to be in God's presence. David recognized that the people of Israel had, through the centuries, not properly respected or appreciated the tabernacle or the presence of God which it symbolized. The activities at the tabernacle had become disconnected from day by day moral behavior. Worshipers were following rituals without concern for their personal spiritual purity. As a result, when they came to the tabernacle, many of the people were unfit and unqualified to be in the presence of their holy awesome God. I think you can easily recognize how David's words have application to the worship service attitudes and patterns of our present world.

David was concerned about the people in his kingdom, and so he wrote out some practical instructions for his readers. Verses 2 through 5 give the answer to the questions of verse 1. According to David, a sincere desire to be close to God would be revealed through appropriate behavior, and doing the things which were pleasing to God would be the proof that the person was fulfilling the Law, and obedience to the Law would be proof that the person was qualified to be in God's presence.

The Law set out very specific requirements concerning behavior, especially behavior related to interpersonal relationships. What is remarkable is that David's instructions contain no mention of ritualistic activities normally associated with the worship of God, activities such as sacrifices, offerings, and rites of purification. The only items mentioned in these verses are moral requirements. The instructions deal with interpersonal human relationships. The point is that people become acceptable to God through their human interactions. How we live our day by day lives with our neighbors, acquaintances, business associates, and even total strangers, determines our qualifications to be in the presence of God.

The general characteristic needed by the true worshiper is a "blameless walk." This does not mean that the person is "perfect" in every way. That is the ideal, but we know that perfection is an impossible condition for fallen humanity. David is an example in Scripture of a person who was considered to be blameless, in spite of the fact that he committed some egregious sins. Abraham is another person who was commended in Scripture for his obedient walk with God in spite of the several serious mistakes.

In verse 2 "walking" and "doing" are synonyms of behavior, and the word "righteous" (*sedeq*) is synonymous with the word "blameless" (*tamim*). This is another example of Hebrew parallelism. Righteousness means that a person can be counted on to do the right thing, especially in accordance with God's expectations. We must keep in mind that verses 2 through 5 describe interpersonal relationships. The righteousness in verse 2 relates to our behavior toward other people. If we treat them in ways that please God, then He will declare us to be righteous.

All the phrases in verses 2 through 5 are in pairs. There are six of these pairs. The next two phrases refer to the way we speak about others. The word translated in our Bible as “truth” is the Hebrew word “faithful.” If we put these phrases in the context of how we treat other people, then faithfulness and lack of slander towards others is the kind of behavior which is pleasing to God.

The phrase “from his heart” indicates that motivations and intentions originate from the heart. The heart, representing the inner being of a person, is what influences the speech of a person. Instead of undercutting the reputation of another person, we must protect the dignity of that person by not gossiping about them or passing on any rumors we hear about them.

The next pair of phrases illustrate other ways we behave toward the people around us. The word “neighbor” means a friend or someone with whom we frequently associate. The word “fellowman” indicates a person with whom we have things in common. The instruction states that we must not treat our neighbors in a malicious way. This is not always easy to do. We all want to get ahead in our world, to gain an advantage in our very competitive circumstances. We selfishly promote ourselves, and we try to satisfy our big egos and ambitions. All too often we advance our own interests by running over others. This is not the way to please God.

“Casting a slur” means to cast doubt, insult, and to run down another person; to try to make them seem less than they really are. Racial and prejudicial statements are a common way to “cast slurs.” There are “smear” campaigns in politics and businesses. In the time of David, many people were doing what was “right in their own eyes” without regard for the feelings of others or the impact their actions might have on others. Scripture demands that the followers of God empathize with the circumstances and feelings of others. We are “to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep.” We must respect the rights, gifts, and status of others.

The next pair of phrases form a different kind of parallelism, called the parallelism of opposites (*antithetical parallelism*). The person who wants to be qualified to be in Yahweh’s presence must not accept or tolerate the actions of evil people. Love for God must be matched with an abhorrence of evil. The “vile man” in verse 4 is the person who has rejected the ways of the LORD. He is someone who has a reputation for evil deeds, the kind of person who knows no other way than evil and mischief.

The person who wants to please God must distance himself/herself from such vile people. We must be careful here; we are not free to despise every sinner, but only those who are hardened in their perversities. The person who wants to please God must both avoid those who are reprobates, and must honor those who fear the LORD. "To honor" means to recognize, accept, and have high regard for all those who "fear the LORD," that is, those who live their lives in accordance with the will and commands of God.

Honoring is not as easy to do as we might think. Christians can be jealous of other believers who are more successful in their ministry efforts. We are often critical of believers who are members of denominations other than our own, or who hold to theological opinions that conflict with our own, or who have cultural practices which are different than ours, or who belong to political parties not our own. Here is something to keep in mind: Almost all of the differences between believers are over secondary issues, not over the fundamentals of our faith; yet these lower level differences have divided church fellowships and even led to physical and legal battles between believers. We need to be as insistent and determined and forceful in honoring those who "fear the LORD" as we are in despising the activities of evil people.

We have two more pairs of phrases to think about. The next pair addresses the topic of integrity, the matter of an individual being true to his/her word. Here's something to think about: when we make a promise to do something, how honest, reliable, and trustworthy are we in following through? [*Let me give you an example: I have lost a lot of books because people never returned them as promised.*] According to David's instructions, our honesty and reputation are more valuable than our time, effort, and money. Integrity and trustworthiness in relationships with others is very important. People need to have confidence in us. The person who wants to have access to the presence of God must have a deep sense of integrity.

The person who wants to please God must also have concern for the poor and those who need justice. In David's era, as in our present era, it was not unusual for people to sometimes need financial assistance. It is important for God's people to be willing to loan money to those individuals who are truly in need, but the lender must not charge usury. Usury is the practice of charging high interest on loans. Usury was one of the main causes of indentured servanthood and slavery in the Old Testament, and this problem still exists in many places in the world today.

According to the Law of Moses, an Israelite was not permitted to take advantage of any fellow Israelite who had fallen on hard times (*See Exodus 22:25-27; Leviticus 25:35-36; Deuteronomy 23:19*). Instead, generous help was to be provided. The person who sought to please God had to have the attitude of compassion rather than greed; he/she had to be eager to empower rather than exploit.

Poor people in the world have always been victims of injustice. Bribery was a problem in the Old Testament, just as it is nowadays. All the prophets condemned the practice of bribery (*for examples, see Isaiah 1:23; 5:23; Amos 5:11-15*). Injustice is one of the sins that makes God extremely angry. The godly person must not treat people unfairly for personal advantage; must not discriminate against the poor in favor of the rich, powerful and influential.

The last two lines of the Psalm are a promise: “The person who does these things will never be shaken.” The person who follows the instructions of verse 2 through 5 enjoys the benefits of security and stability and, undoubtedly, satisfaction. That person may experience adversities in life, but he/she will have confidence and joy through intimate fellowship with the LORD. Dwelling with the LORD is the reward for blameless and righteous living.

It is easy to misunderstand this Psalm, and I want to insert a word of caution before I conclude this message. The Psalm by itself can convey the impression that a person can earn salvation through good works — just do the works of verses 2 through 5 and the LORD will welcome you into His presence. That is not a truth which is validated in other portions of Scripture, nor even in other writings of David. In writing this Psalm, David was drawing the attention of his fellow Israelites to both their casual attitudes about Yahweh and their ungodly treatment towards others.

Most of the people of Israel assumed that God would accept them regardless of their attitudes and actions. David wrote that it was not like that at all. The priority, the starting point, was love for Yahweh. Love for God should motivate us to love the people around us, and the love we have for the people around us will be the evidence that we can be in the LORD’s presence.

Many centuries later, Jesus summed up the teaching of this Psalm in response to a question. When Jesus was asked about the greatest commandment in the Law, Jesus said: “Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ Jesus said that this was the first and greatest commandment. And then Jesus added what He called the second most important commandment: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” These two commandments cannot be separated.

David wanted to revolutionize the attitudes and behavior of the Israelites and to help them be qualified for close fellowship in the presence of the LORD. There needs to be a similar revolution in the hearts and behavior of believers today.

If we have the correct attitudes and behavior, then we will never be shaken.

[Extra interesting information: Before there was a king in Israel, the tabernacle was located in Shiloh. In preparations for a battle with the Philistines, the Israelites foolishly removed the Ark of the Covenant from the tabernacle. In the battle, the Ark was captured by the Philistines. It was returned after several months, but then it remained in a private home for more than 60 years. After David became king, he put the Ark of the Covenant in a tent in the city of Jerusalem. (see I Samuel 4:1-11; 5:1-7:2; II Samuel 6:19; I Chronicles 15-16; I Chronicles 16:39-40; II Chronicles 1:3-6, 13)]